



USE OF INTERACTIVE ESP: LETTING STUDENTS SPEAK

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Abstract This article examines the pedagogical potential of employing diverse utterance types - questions, imperatives, hypotheticals, and discourse markers - to transform English for Specific Purposes (ESP) instruction from teacher-centered monologue into dynamic, interactive learning. Drawing on fifteen years of teaching experience in a petroleum university, the author argues that the strategic deployment of varied utterances serves not merely as a teaching technique but as a fundamental mechanism for creating the conditions in which authentic language acquisition occurs. The article analyzes how different utterance types activate distinct cognitive and communicative processes, how they can be systematically integrated into ESP lesson design, and how they address the particular challenges of teaching English to technical specialists who may lack confidence in communicative situations.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, classroom interaction, utterance types, interactive teaching, petroleum engineering education, communicative competence

Introduction

The English for Specific Purposes classroom occupies a unique and challenging position in higher education. Unlike general English instruction, which can draw on universal themes and everyday situations, ESP must bridge two distinct domains: the linguistic and the technical. Students must simultaneously develop language proficiency and acquire the specialized discourse of their future profession. Teachers, often language specialists rather than engineers, must guide this dual

development without the deep technical background that would make integration seamless.

This article explores a specific dimension of classroom interaction: the types of utterances teachers and students deploy and how variation in these utterances shapes the learning environment. I argue that intentional, strategic variation in utterance types - moving systematically among questions, commands, hypotheticals, discourse markers, and other linguistic forms - creates the conditions for authentic communication to emerge. By examining how different utterances function in the ESP classroom, identifying common patterns that limit interaction, and proposing practical alternatives grounded in petroleum industry contexts, we aim to provide fellow educators with tools for transforming their teaching practice.

Literature Review

The study of classroom discourse has deep roots in applied linguistics. Sinclair and Coulthard's pioneering work on classroom interaction established that teacher-student exchanges follow predictable patterns, with the Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) sequence dominating traditional instruction. In this pattern, the teacher initiates (typically with a question), a student responds, and the teacher provides feedback. While this structure enables efficient information transmission, it limits opportunities for extended student output and authentic communication.

Research on second language acquisition has consistently demonstrated that productive language use - speaking and writing - develops through opportunities for meaningful output. Swain's Output Hypothesis argues that producing language pushes learners to process syntax more deeply than comprehension alone requires. When students formulate responses, they must attend not only to meaning but to the linguistic forms that convey meaning accurately. This cognitive processing strengthens acquisition.

The role of questions in facilitating output has received particular attention. Brock demonstrated that referential questions (those to which the teacher does not

already know the answer) elicit longer and more syntactically complex student responses than display questions (those testing known information). Subsequent research has refined this finding, showing that question type interacts with learner proficiency, task demands, and instructional context in complex ways.

Beyond questions, other utterance types have received less systematic attention in the ESP literature. Imperatives, which direct action, appear primarily in discussions of classroom management rather than language development. Hypotheticals, which invite speculation about unreal situations, are treated as grammatical structures to be mastered rather than communicative tools to be deployed. Discourse markers, those small words and phrases that structure interaction – “well”, “so”, “actually”, “you know” - are often overlooked entirely despite their centrality to fluent communication.

The ESP context adds particular dimensions to these considerations. Technical specialists bring distinctive characteristics to the language classroom: strong analytical skills, familiarity with systematic problem-solving, and deep domain knowledge that can be leveraged for language learning. They may also bring resistance to communicative activities that seem disconnected from their professional goals and anxiety about performing in a language where they feel less competent than in their technical work. Effective ESP instruction must engage the former while addressing the latter.

Analysis

Walk into many ESP classrooms and you will hear a familiar sound: the teacher’s voice rising at the end of sentences. Questions. Questions about vocabulary. Questions about grammar. Questions about reading comprehension. Questions about technical content. The interrogative mode so dominates language teaching that many teachers would feel they were not teaching if they were not asking questions.

Questions serve important functions. They check comprehension. They prompt student output. They signal what matters. However, when questions become the primary or exclusive mode of interaction, several problems emerge.

First, the interactional burden falls entirely on the teacher. The teacher must formulate each question, select a respondent, evaluate the response, and formulate the next question. Students need only respond when called upon. This pattern, repeated endlessly, produces what Brazilian educator Paulo Freire called the “banking model” of education: teachers deposit information into passive students, who receive, file, and store it.

Second, questions constrain the range of possible student responses. A student answering a question operates within boundaries set by the teacher - boundaries of topic, of length, of acceptability. Even when teachers encourage extended responses, the question-answer format implicitly limits what counts as relevant.

Third, the interrogative classroom differs fundamentally from the communicative situations students will encounter professionally. Petroleum engineers do not spend their days answering display questions from supervisors. They explain findings, propose actions, challenge assumptions, negotiate interpretations - communicative acts that require initiating as well as responding, questioning as well as answering, directing as well as following.

If the interrogative classroom has limits, what alternatives exist? The answer lies in expanding the range of utterance types teachers deploy and, crucially, in creating conditions for students to deploy varied utterances themselves.

Consider the imperative - the grammatical form of commands and directions. In many classrooms, imperatives appear only in management contexts: “Open your books”, “Listen to the recording”, “Work in pairs”. These imperatives direct behavior without inviting engagement.

However, imperatives can function differently. Consider these alternatives:

“Explain this pressure gradient to me as if I were a new intern who just joined the team”.

“Draw the drilling rig and label each component we discussed yesterday”.

“Convince your partner that horizontal drilling is the right choice for this reservoir”.

These imperatives do not simply direct behavior; they create scenarios that require students to draw on technical knowledge, adapt it to communicative purposes, and produce extended language. The imperative form, paradoxically, can liberate students by providing clear structure within which they can exercise creativity.

Hypothetical utterances invite students into imagined worlds where they must apply knowledge to novel situations. For technical specialists, who spend much of their professional lives reasoning about what would happen under different conditions, hypotheticals feel natural and engaging.

Examples from petroleum contexts:

“What would you do if you lost circulation while drilling through this formation?”

“Suppose seismic interpretation suggested a fault here that our well log data doesn’t show. How would you reconcile this discrepancy?”

“If you were presenting this reservoir model to skeptical investors, what evidence would you emphasize?”

Hypotheticals activate multiple cognitive processes simultaneously. Students must recall relevant technical knowledge, imagine its application to the specified scenario, formulate this application in language, and anticipate how their response might be received. The linguistic demands - conditional structures, modal verbs, hedging expressions - emerge naturally from the communicative task rather than being imposed as abstract grammar points.

For lower-proficiency students, hypotheticals can be structured with support. Sentence starters reduce cognitive load: *“If I encountered this situation, I would first...”* Visuals provide anchoring. Partner work allows rehearsal before public performance. The goal is not perfect hypothetical discourse from the beginning but gradual development of the capacity to reason and communicate about unreal situations.

Discourse markers - those small words and phrases that organize talk, signal relationships, and manage interaction - receive remarkably little attention in ESP instruction. Yet they are essential to fluent, natural communication.

Consider a student presenting a reservoir analysis. Without discourse markers, the presentation might proceed:

“We analyzed core samples. We found low permeability. We recommended hydraulic fracturing. We calculated optimal fracture spacing. We presented to management”.

With discourse markers:

“So, we analyzed the core samples and found low permeability. Therefore, we recommended hydraulic fracturing. Then we calculated optimal fracture spacing, and finally presented to management”.

Teaching discourse markers requires moving beyond lists and definitions. Students need to hear them used naturally, to notice their functions, and to practice deploying them in extended discourse. One effective technique involves providing minimally marked texts and asking students to insert appropriate markers, then comparing versions and discussing the effects of different choices.

Returning to questions - not to abandon them but to deploy them more strategically. The distinction between display questions (testing known information) and referential questions (seeking unknown information) remains valuable, but finer distinctions enrich the question repertoire.

Procedural questions invite students to explain processes: *“How would you go about interpreting this seismic section?”* These questions tap into procedural knowledge, which differs from declarative knowledge and better approximates professional problem-solving.

Evaluative questions ask for judgments: *“Which development scenario seems most promising and why?”* These require students to weigh evidence, consider trade-offs, and articulate rationales - higher-order cognitive and communicative demands.

Meta-cognitive questions prompt reflection on thinking: *“Why did you approach the problem that way? What alternatives did you consider?”* These develop students’ awareness of their own problem-solving processes and their ability to communicate about them.

Hypothetical questions, discussed above, blend with other types. The key insight is that different questions activate different kinds of thinking and therefore elicit different kinds of language. Varying question types systematically exposes students to the full range of communicative demands they will face professionally.

Teacher utterance variation matters primarily because it creates conditions for student utterance variation. The goal is not a more interesting teacher monologue but a classroom where students deploy the full range of utterance types themselves.

Several principles support this goal. First, wait time matters. After asking a question or issuing an invitation to speak, teachers must wait- often longer than feels comfortable - for students to formulate responses. Silence that feels awkward to the teacher may be productive thinking time for students.

Second, response patterns matter. When teachers accept and build on student contributions rather than simply evaluating them, they signal that student utterances matter. Simple moves like “tell me more about that” or “how does that connect to what Maria said” extend student talk and deepen engagement.

Third, student-student interaction matters. Pair and small-group work multiplies opportunities for student utterance far beyond what whole-class discussion can provide. The teacher's role shifts from primary interlocutor to designer of interaction and resource for consultation.

Fourth, task design matters. Tasks that require information exchange, negotiation of meaning, or collaborative problem-solving generate more and richer student talk than tasks that can be completed individually. Jigsaw activities, where different students hold different pieces of information needed to complete a task, force genuine communication. The principles above become most powerful when embedded in authentic professional contexts. Petroleum engineering offers rich possibilities for interactive tasks that generate varied utterances. Consider a reservoir management scenario. Students receive conflicting reports from different data sources - seismic indicating one structure, well logs suggesting another. Working in pairs, they must reconcile the discrepancy and prepare a recommendation. This task generates:

- Questions: *"What did your seismic interpretation show? How confident are you in that pick?"*
- Hypotheticals: *"If we assume the fault continues here, then the well log data would make sense".*
- Imperatives: *"Look at this amplitude anomaly - tell me what you think it represents".*
- Discourse markers: *"So we agree on the basic structure, but we need to resolve this mismatch before presenting".*

A drilling scenario: One student plays the driller, another the geologist monitoring real-time data. Unexpected gas shows appear. The driller must decide whether to continue drilling or circulate bottoms up. This simulation generates urgent, authentic communication with genuine consequences (in the simulation) for decisions.

A presentation scenario: Students prepare and deliver technical presentations to simulated management committees comprising their peers. Presenters must explain technical findings; committee members must ask questions, challenge assumptions, and ultimately decide whether to approve recommended actions. This format generates extended student utterances in both presenting and questioning roles.

These contexts share common features. They are technically authentic, drawing on real petroleum challenges. They are communicatively demanding, requiring varied utterance types. They are interactive, with success depending on effective exchange of information and ideas and they are engaging, because students recognize their relevance to future professional practice.

The argument developed here - that varied utterance types create conditions for interactive ESP learning - raises several broader considerations for teaching practice and teacher development.

First, utterance variation requires intentional design. Teachers accustomed to interrogative modes may not naturally deploy imperatives, hypotheticals, and discourse markers strategically. Developing this capacity requires awareness of current practice, familiarity with alternatives, and willingness to experiment. Reflective practice, peer observation, and collaborative lesson planning support this development.

Second, utterance variation interacts with proficiency levels. Lower-proficiency students need more structured support - sentence frames, visual aids, rehearsal opportunities - to produce varied utterances successfully. Higher-proficiency students can manage more open-ended tasks with less scaffolding. Effective teachers calibrate demands to students' current capabilities while gradually increasing challenge.

Third, utterance variation intersects with cultural expectations about classroom interaction. Students from educational traditions emphasizing teacher authority and

student receptivity may initially resist activities that require extended student talk. Explicit discussion of classroom norms, gradual introduction of interactive tasks, and consistent positive reinforcement for participation help bridge this cultural gap.

Fourth, utterance variation challenges assessment conventions. If classrooms become sites of authentic communication, assessment must capture the communicative competence students develop. Traditional tests measuring discrete knowledge miss much of what interactive approaches cultivate. Performance assessments - presentations, simulations, project portfolios - better align with interactive pedagogy but require more sophisticated design and implementation.

For ESP teacher preparation, these considerations suggest that methods courses should address not only general principles of language teaching but specific techniques for generating varied classroom interaction. Novice teachers need opportunities to observe interactive teaching, to practice designing interactive tasks, and to reflect on their emerging interactive competence.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has argued that intentional variation in utterance types - moving beyond the interrogative dominance of traditional teaching to deploy imperatives, hypotheticals, discourse markers, and strategically varied questions - creates conditions for authentic communication to emerge in ESP classrooms. When teachers design interactions that require students to explain, imagine, direct, and structure discourse, students develop the communicative competence that professional practice demands.

Several recommendations follow from this analysis. For classroom teachers, the first step is awareness: recording and reflecting on current practice to identify which utterance types dominate and which remain underutilized. From this awareness, incremental experimentation can expand the teaching repertoire.

For teacher educators, the implication is that methods courses should explicitly address utterance variation as a pedagogical tool. Novice teachers need not only

principles but practices - concrete techniques for generating varied interaction that they can adapt to their own contexts.

For curriculum designers, the challenge is to create space for interactive teaching within programs that may emphasize coverage and testing. Block scheduling that allows extended activities, classroom configurations that facilitate interaction, and assessment systems that reward communicative competence all support interactive approaches.

For researchers, many questions remain. How does utterance variation interact with different technical domains within petroleum engineering? What patterns of variation prove most effective at different proficiency levels? How can teacher development programs most effectively cultivate interactive teaching competence? These questions invite systematic investigation.

The ESP classroom stands at the intersection of language and profession. When that classroom becomes a site of genuine interaction - where teachers and students deploy varied utterances in service of authentic communicative purposes - it prepares students not merely to know English but to use English in the professional lives that await them.

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